

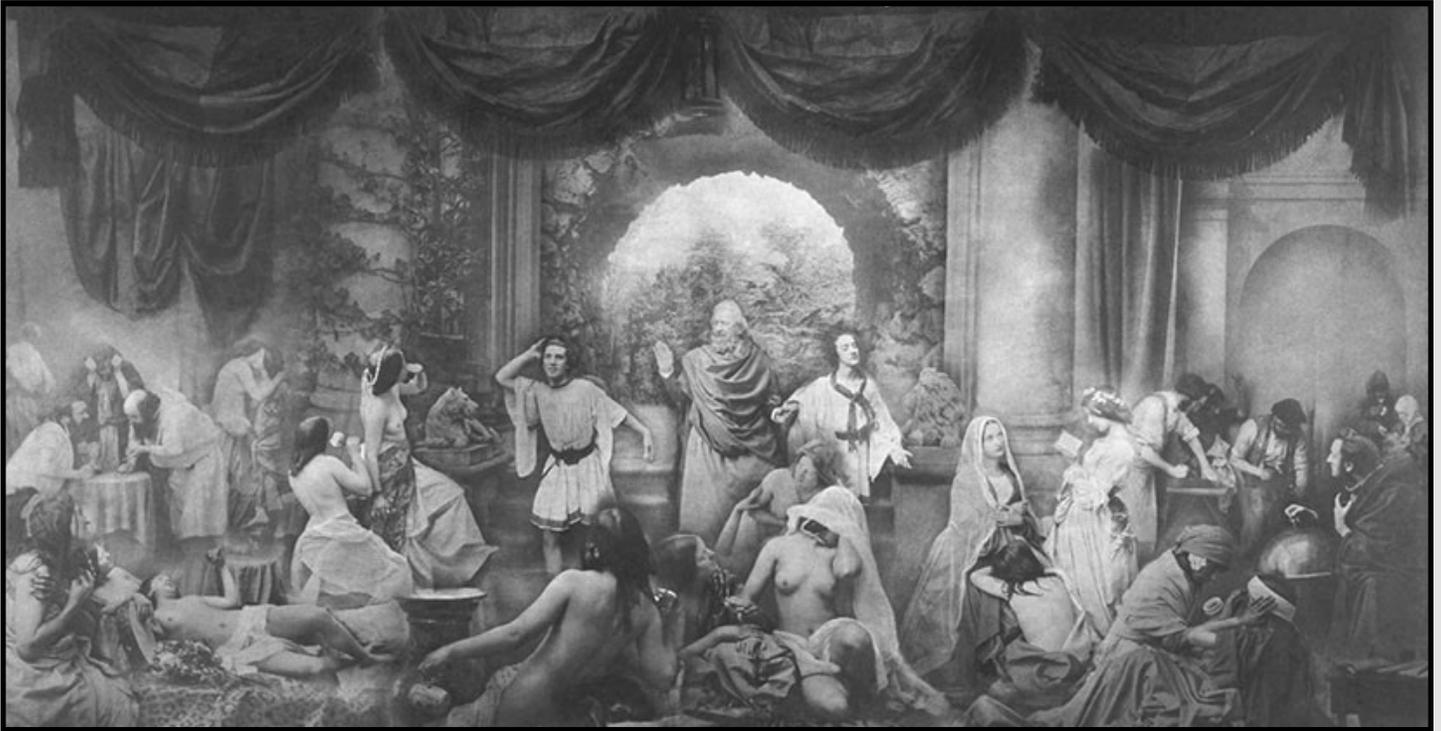
The Tableau

tab·leau vi·vant

/tä,blō vē'väN,tä,blō vē'vänt/

noun historical

a silent and motionless group of people arranged to represent a scene or incident.



The introduction of a “tableau” to the Mardi Gras tradition began in Mobile with the Cowbelleions. The idea, beginning in 1841, was for the group to present their own *tableau vivant*, a nineteenth century amusement in which actors presented themselves as a living still-life, representing one particular scene or story from history or literature. These were produced in theaters but also in the parlors of the elite as private entertainments; a motionless form of Charades for the Victorians.

The Cowbellion de Rakin Society followed their second thematic parade with a tableau in the theater but only after costumed participants paraded through the streets, some on carriage, some on horseback and some on foot. Their intention was to create a unique and artistic interpretation of a high-minded theme, while keeping their individual identities hidden, and to present their artistry to the public as a dramatic, torch-lit, nighttime spectacle. The first year, for example, they were dressed to represent the pantheon of Greek gods and in later years the Cowbellion de Rakin Society recreated scenes from British literature or from the Classical past, always using their annual parade to reveal educated status and cultured sensibilities.

The press measured the success of each parade by the historical accuracy of the costumes, carefully critiquing the overall unity of the design and the clarity with which the themes were interpreted.

The Cowbellion parade of 1840, for example, was described that year by the nationally renowned actor, Tasistro, in Mobile for the opening of the new theater, co-managed by Charles Fisher, who was said to have inspired the concept.

This year...the town was astonished by one of the most gorgeous and unique spectacles that was ever beheld in modern times. This was a personification of the Greek mythology. I have seen many beautiful sights in this world: I have witnessed, in France, in Spain, and in Italy, some of the most stupendous exhibitions that the fertility of human invention ever did conceive; but I never had beheld before anything so chaste, so compact, and so complete, as this splendid embodiment of the fabulous history of the gods fo the heathen world. Every character was as perfectly represented as if a Phidias or an Apelles had sketched it out and as the procession moved along in silent order...without a feeling of intense admiration for the individual who had planned and concerted the whole affair.

December 31, 1841
The First Tableau

This year they grouped themselves into tableaux, illustrating costumes and characters of more modern history – Every national peculiarity had its representative, and as the motly crowd filed into the great Hall of the Alhambra, or with less ceremoney gathered round the board of hospitable entertainers, in another part of our city, on might fancyy them a deleation from all nations, an assemblage from all quarters of the earth, which representing truly the peculiarities of each people, made a fantastical ...

*-Alexandria Gazette (Alexandria, Virginia),
January 15, 1842.*

The 1846 parade of the Cowbellions was similarly described in the *Mobile Press Register* on January 1, 1847.

It was truly an imposing spectacle – the most so, taking it in all its accompaniments, its illuminated banners and other unique appointments, that the society ever yet made. The fraternity represented this year some of the most distinguished warriors of ancient and modern times.

Each warrior had his group of attendants, all clad and armed in the style of the age and nations they prefigured. These characters and their followers were attempted to be represented in statuary, and the attempt was as completely successful as it was possible to make animated forms appear like inanimate. Hence the dresses of the masquers were of snowy whiteness from head to foot and even in their countenances there was the very look of chiseled marble itself.

The impression to visitors was still just as striking nearly 50 years later, which can be seen in descriptions like this one from 1903.

...Scenic tableau of the most striking events in history, romance and poetry presented by groups of living characters costumed according to the most rigorous demands of the periods embraced in the presentations and the whole decorated and illuminated with all the splendor that light and coloring can add make up the grand displays.

These processions, moving o properly constructed mechanism through the streets unroll before the vast crowds of spectators, successions of artistic and beautiful scenes that delight and instruct without giving the slightest hint or suggestion of who are the providers of these magic spectacles...

Times Picayune, February 22, 1903

The tradition of preceding each ball with a tableau is a custom which has continued among Mobile's mystic parading societies for almost 170 years, from the 1840's until today.

See also:

<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/tableau-vivant/>

<http://www.notableauvivant.com/about/>